PRESBYTERY OF MACKINAW
OCTOBER 21-22
JOHN M. BUCHANAN

INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS:

AN IMPORTANT MOMENT IN THE LIFE OF OUR CHURCH .J.

AS WE APPROACH A GENERAL ASSEMBLY WHICH WILL REQUIRE US TO MAKE DIFFICULT DECISIONS.

GOING INTO THAT PERIOD OF TIME WE ARE DIVIDED ~~WE'RE~~ A LITTLE FRIGHTENED OF THE FUTURE.

-WE'RE WORRIED ABOUT OUR MEMBER DECLINE

-AND THE FACT THAT THOSE OF US WHO REMAIN SEEM LESS AND LESS WILLING TO TRUST GOVERNING BODIES AND PROFESSIONAL STAFF WITH MISSION, POLICY, PROGRAM AND MOSTLY WITH OUR

MONEY. It feels like we're becoming congregational...

-AND WE ARE VERY CONCERNED THAT IN REGARD TO ONE OF THE ISSUES AHEAD OF US, WE COULD BE A DIVIDED church - literally. LIT~~ERALLY~~ -- ~~CHURCH~~ IN THE NOT-TOO-DISTANT FUTURE.

I HEAR RUMORS -- AS YOU DO -- THAT SOME HOPE FOR A SPLIT...

-THAT WE WILL BE A BETTER, MORE VIABLE CHURCH IF THEY SIMPLY GO AWAY.

i.e. -THE PRESBYTERIAN LAY COMMITTEE (PLC) TO THE PCA OR THE WITHERSPOON AND MORE LIGHTS TO UCC.

SOME ARE EVEN SAYING THAT THE DEAL IS DONE -- AND THAT NATIONAL ASSETS ARE ALREADY CARVED UP ..

if so it would be the most efficient piece of business accomplished in the PC USA in my lifetime

(THE WHIMSICAL CYNIC IN ME ASKS -- does winner get Ghost Ranch + "DOES THE LOSER GET THE BUILDING IN LOUISVILLE?")

MY GUESS IS THAT NOBODY WILL LEAVE -- THAT AFTER RE-IMAGINING EVERYBODY IS ON BOARD AND WE'RE STUCK WITH EACH OTHER. - maybe playing a game of "we can wait them out" - but - nobody - is walking.

SO, A MAJOR QUESTION FOR ALL OF US IS -- "HOW ARE WE GOING TO BE A FAITHFUL CHURCH IN SPITE OF SOME ISSUES ABOUT WHICH WE HAVE DEEP, STRONG, AND FUNDAMENTAL DISAGREEMENTS?

AND A SUB-SET OF THAT QUESTION -

-ARE THERE WAYS FOR US TO BE WHO WE WANT TO BE (BASED ON SOME COMMONLY-HELD ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A -- NATIONAL CHURCH AND A PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH -- AND AT THE SAME TIME TO TALK TO ONE ANOTHER, TO ENGAGE IN HONEST DIALOGUE, TO BE A COMMUNITY OF FAITH THAT IN SOME WAY POINTS THE WORLD TO THE TRUTH, THE REDEMPTIVE POWER OF THE GOSPEL WE CLAIM AND HAS CLAIMED US.

THAT IS WHY WE ARE HERE AND WHY OTHERS ALL OVER THE COUNTRY ARE GATHERING IN SIMILAR EVENTS.

I THANK YOU FOR INVITING ME -- ~~THERE ARE NO EXPERTS AND I CLAIM NO EXPERTISE~~.

an ambitious + helpful experience tomorrow →

I HAVE BEEN BAPTIZED BY FIRE, AND HAVE ACCUMULATED A LITTLE EXPERIENCE.

AS MODERATOR OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE TO REVIEW THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY COUNCIL -- IN 1994, WHICH RECEIVED THE 52 OVERTURES ABOUT RE-IMAGINING.

?

AND THEN AS A MEMBER OF THE MODERATOR'S SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON RECONCILIATION CHARGED TO WORK WITH THE PLC TO ESTABLISH BOUNDARIES FOR THE WORK OF THE PLC.

?

BUT, MORE IMPORTANTLY, AS A PASTOR OF FOUR CONGREGATIONS WHICH IN SOME WAYS REPRESENT THE BIBLICAL, THEOLOGICAL, SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL DIVERSITY OF THE PRESBYTERIAN FAMILY.

MY PROPOSAL THIS EVENING IS THAT WE THINK, FIRST BIBLICALLY AND THEOLOGICALLY ABOUT THIS MOMENT IN TIME.

UNDER THE RUBRIC, "A STRONG WORD FROM THE MIDDLE OF THE ROAD", AND A LOOK AT A PASSAGE, ACTS 15, WHICH MAY BE HELPFUL TO US --

AND THEN -- THAT WE THINK TOGETHER ABOUT WHERE WE ARE -- IDEOLOGICALLY AND

-pragmatically-

POLITICALLY AS A CHURCH.

THIRD -- THAT I SHARE WITH YOU SOMETHING OF THE METHODOLOGY WHICH at the 206th GA ALLOWED 55 STRANGERS TO HANDLE THE DEPTH AND PASSION OF THE 52 OVERTURES FROM AROUND THE CHURCH STIMULATED BY RE-IMAGINING AND TO PRODUCE A DOCUMENT AND A CLIMATE THAT WAS HEALING AND RESTORATIVE AND FULL OF HOPE.

AND FINALLY...

THAT WE ALLOCATE SOME TIME TO ROLL UP OUR SLEEVES AND TO TALK WITH ONE ANOTHER PERSON TO PERSON, HEART TO HEART, BROTHERS AND SISTERS WHO IN JESUS CHRIST, HAVE BEEN RECONCILED TO GOD AND THEREFORE

TO ONE ANOTHER -- AND WHOSE EVANGELISTIC MISSION IS GIVEN TO US BY OUR LORD -- WHO PRAYED FOR THE ONENESS OF HIS DISCIPLES -- THAT THE WORLD MIGHT KNOW THE GOSPEL.

not for their own enjoyment, comfort, security but

→ to p 13

a great story about the church dealing w/ deep + profound disagreements.

ACTS 15:1-20

THE COUNCIL AT JERUSALEM

-NRSV-

THEN CERTAIN INDIVIDUALS CAME DOWN FROM JUDEA AND WERE TEACHING THE BROTHERS, "UNLESS YOU ARE CIRCUMCISED ACCORDING THE CUSTOM OF MOSES, YOU CANNOT BE SAVED." AND AFTER PAUL AND BARNABAS HAD NO SMALL DISSENTION AND DEBATE WITH THEM, PAUL AND BARNABAS AND SOME OF THE OTHERS WERE APPOINTED TO GO UP TO JERUSALEM TO

DISCUSS THIS QUESTION WITH THE APOSTLES AND THE ELDERS. | So THEY WERE SENT ON THEIR WAY BY THE CHURCH, AND AS THEY PASSED THROUGH BOTH PHOENICIA AND SAMARIA, THEY REPORTED THE CONVERSION OF THE GENTILES, AND BROUGHT GREAT JOY TO ALL THE BELIEVERS. | WHEN THEY CAME TO JERUSALEM, THEY WERE WELCOMED BY THE CHURCH AND THE APOSTLES AND THE ELDERS, AND THEY REPORTED ALL THAT GOD HAD DONE WITH THEM. | BUT SOME BELIEVERS WHO BELONGED TO THE SECT OF THE PHARISEES STOOD UP AND SAID, "IT IS NECESSARY FOR THEM TO KEEP THE LAW OF MOSES."

THE APOSTLES AND THE ELDERS MET TOGETHER TO CONSIDER THIS MATTER.| AFTER

THERE HAD BEEN MUCH DEBATE, PETER STOOD UP AND SAID TO THEM, "MY BROTHERS, YOU KNOW THAT IN THE EARLY DAYS GOD MADE A CHOICE AMONG YOU, THAT I SHOULD BE THE ONE THROUGH WHOM THE GENTILES WOULD HEAR THE MESSAGE OF THE GOOD NEWS AND BECOME BELIEVERS. AND GOD, WHO KNOWS THE HUMAN HEART, TESTIFIED TO THEM BY GIVING THEM THE HOLY SPIRIT, JUST AS HE DID TO US; HE HAS MADE NO DISTINCTION BETWEEN THEM AND US. NOW THEREFORE WHY ARE YOU PUTTING GOD TO THE TEST BY PLACING ON THE NECK OF THE DISCIPLES A YOKE THAT NEITHER OUR ANCESTORS NOR WE HAVE BEEN ABLE TO BEAR? ON THE CONTRARY, WE BELIEVE THAT WE WILL BE SAVED THROUGH THE GRACE OF THE LORD JESUS, JUST AS THEY WILL."

THE WHOLE ASSEMBLY KEPT SILENCE, AND LISTENED TO BARNABAS AND PAUL AS THEY TOLD OF ALL THE SIGN AND WONDERS THAT GOD HAD DONE THROUGH THEM AMONG THE GENTILES. AFTER THEY FINISHED SPEAKING, JAMES REPLIED, "MY BROTHERS, LISTEN TO ME. SIMEON HAS RELATED HOW GOD FIRST LOOKED FAVORABLY ON THE GENTILES, TO TAKE FROM AMONG THEM A PEOPLE FOR HIS NAME. THIS AGREES WITH THE WORDS OF THE PROPHETS, AS IT IS WRITTEN,

'AFTER THIS I WILL RETURN,
AND I WILL REBUILD THE DWELLING OF DAVID, WHICH HAS FALLEN;
FROM ITS RUINS I WILL REBUILD IT,

A STRONG WORD FROM THE MIDDLE OF THE ROAD

OCTOBER 21, 1995
MACKINAW PRESBYTERY
JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
SCRIPTURE:
JOHN 16: 12-15
ACTS 15: 1-11

"ON THE CONTRARY, WE BELIEVE THAT WE WILL BE SAVED THROUGH THE GRACE OF THE LORD JESUS, JUST AS THEY WILL." (NRSV)

ONE OF MY FAVORITE POETS IS THE LATE PHYLLIS MCGINLEY. AND ONE OF MY FAVORITE PHYLLIS MCGINLEY POEMS IS ENTITLED, LAMENT FOR A WAVERING VIEWPOINT:

"I WANT TO BE A TORY
AND WITH THE TORIES STAND,

Elect and bound for glory

With a proud, congenial band.

Or in the Leftist hallways

I gladly would abide,

But from my youth I always

Could see the Other Side.

"How comfortable to rest with

The safe and armored folk

Congenially blessed with

Opinions stout as oak.

Assured that every question

One single answer hath,

They keep a good digestion

And whistle in their bath.

"But all my views are plastic,

With neither form nor pride.

They stretch like new elastic

Around the Other Side;

And I grow lean and haggard

With searching out the taint

Of hero in the Blackguard,

Of villain in the saint.

"Ah, snug lie those that slumber

Beneath conviction's roof.

Their floors are sturdy lumber,

Their windows, weatherproof.

But I sleep cold forever

And cold sleep all my kind,

Born nakedly to shiver

In the draft from an open mind."

[TIMES THREE, SELECTED VERSE FROM THREE DECADES, P.207]

I DON'T KNOW ABOUT YOU, | BUT I FIND THAT LIFE IS A LOT LESS COMPLICATED IF I DON'T HAVE AN OPEN MIND. | IN FACT, LIFE IS SIMPLIFIED CONSIDERABLY IF I CLOSE MY MIND TO THE MYRIAD OF OPTIONS OPEN TO ME ON A MYRIAD OF TOPICS. | IT IS COMFORTABLE TO KNOW EXACTLY WHAT YOU BELIEVE, | WHERE THE BOUNDARIES OF TRUTH LIE | AND ABOVE ALL ELSE WHAT IS MORAL AND IMMORAL BEHAVIOR. | IT IS TEMPTING, | NO MATTER THE TOPIC, | TO RETREAT TO THE NEAREST CERTAINTY | AND HOLD ON FOR DEAR LIFE IN MATTERS OF SEXUAL MORALITY, POLITICS, | CERTAINLY RELIGION.

In fact, there is the atmosphere an unprecedented hunger for certainty, for fixed and absolute truth, for an ethic that knows what is right + wrong. (X) Wm Bennett - Book of Virtues - Best seller! And a consequent sense that if your religion doesn't provide that, maybe

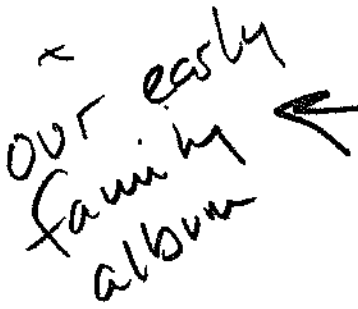
You need to get a new one.
Cite Moody Bible Inst - students - striding down center aisle. w/ Bible opened - breathing fire.

THE TROUBLE IS, THERE SEEMS TO BE SOMETHING ABOUT RELIGIOUS FAITH THAT CHALLENGES ALL CERTAINTIES; SOMETHING ABOUT BELIEVING IN A LIVING GOD THAT CALLS US TO A POSTURE OF OPENNESS, TO A WILLINGNESS TO BE SURPRISED, TO BE STARTLED WITH WHERE, IN GOD'S NAME, WE FIND OURSELVES GOING . . . OR WHO, IN GOD'S NAME, WE FIND OURSELVES ASSOCIATING WITH . . . OR WHAT, IN GOD'S NAME, WE FIND OURSELVES BELIEVING.

THAT DYNAMIC IS THERE FROM THE BEGINNING OF OUR STORY. THINGS WERE NOT WORKING OUT IN THE EARLIEST CHRISTIAN CHURCH THE WAY THEY WERE SUPPOSED TO.

In the towns and cities where the disciples of Jesus visited the synagogues to tell the story, things were taking a surprising turn. More and more Gentiles were responding positively to the Gospel, believing it, asking to be baptized and to become part of the church. That wasn't supposed to happen. Everyone knew who the chosen people were. Gentiles were the unchosen.

What perplexed the disciples was the simple fact that Gentiles wanted in the church, which they had been assuming was an exclusively Jewish operation. As often happens when change is occurring, some were probably allowing them in:



OTHERS WERE NOT. | AND IN THE MIDDLE OF THE CONTROVERSY, THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES RELATES A PECULIAR BUT VERY INSTRUCTIVE STORY. | IT'S ABOUT A GENTILE NAMED CORNELIUS AND A JEW NAMED PETER. PETER HAS A VISION WHICH COMPLETELY OVERTURNS HIS FORMER NOTION OF WHAT IT MEANS TO BE FAITHFUL TO GOD. \ THE VISION ASSURES HIM THAT THE OLD CATEGORIES OF CLEAN AND UNCLEAN, RIGHT AND WRONG, ARE NOT ABSOLUTE. \ AS A RESULT, PETER AGREES TO BAPTIZE CORNELIUS, THE GENTILE. WELL, WHEN THE CHURCH LEADERS BACK IN JERUSALEM GET WIND OF WHAT HAPPENED, PETER IS CALLED ON THE CARPET. \ HE EXPLAINS HIS DREAM. \ HE TELLS THE CHURCH LEADERS THAT GOD APPARENTLY IS

INTERESTED IN GENTILES IN ADDITION TO JEWS, AND THEY AGREE TO THIS NEW DEVELOPMENT, SORT OF.

NOT LONG THEREAFTER, TWO MISSIONARIES BY THE NAME OF PAUL AND BARNABAS ARE AGGRESSIVELY RECRUITING GENTILES IN ANTIOCH. A DELEGATION FROM JERUSALEM MAKES A SITE VISIT TO THE NEW PROJECT AND THEY ASK A VERY DELICATE QUESTION ... "YOU ARE CIRCUMCISING THESE NEW CONVERTS, AREN'T YOU?" - not a particularly pleasant prospect, obviously. Can you imagine adding that to your requirements for new members?

IN ONE OF THE UNDERSTATEMENTS OF ALL TIME, ACTS SAYS, "THERE WAS NO SMALL DISSENTION AND DEBATE." THIS TIME PAUL AND BARNABAS ARE CALLED ON THE CARPET

in Acts 15

... AND THE RECORD OF THAT CHURCH MEETING SOUNDS A LOT LIKE WHAT HAPPENS WHENEVER CHRISTIANS GET TOGETHER FOR OFFICIAL COUNCILS, CONCLAVES, AND CONFERENCES OR GENERAL ASSEMBLIES.

PETER SPEAKS ABOUT HIS OWN CHANGE OF HEART. | PAUL AND BARNABAS EXPLAIN THAT GOD'S SPIRIT DOESN'T SEEM TO KNOW OR CARE ABOUT THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN JEWS AND GENTILES.

AND THEN JAMES PROPOSES A COMPROMISE: | A STRONG WORD FROM THE MIDDLE OF THE ROAD. BOTH POINTS OF VIEW ARE INTELLECTUALLY DEFENSIBLE. | THE CONSERVATIVES ARE DEFENDING A GOOD AND

VENERABLE TRADITION, A BEAUTIFUL AND JUST AND ENDURING FAITH THAT HAS CARRIED THEM THROUGH TIMES OF PERSECUTION AND EXILE. THE LIBERALS NEED TO KNOW THAT TRADITION -- THAT IT IS THEIRS AS WELL. THE LIBERALS, ON THE OTHER HAND, ARE INVOKING A PART OF THE TRADITION THE CONSERVATIVES SOMETIMES FORGET, NAMELY THAT THE SPIRIT OF GOD NOT ONLY DOESN'T PAY MUCH ATTENTION TO HUMAN RULES AND REGULATIONS, BUT SOMETIMES SEEMS TO CHANGE OR TO CHALLENGE THOSE RULES AND REGULATIONS WHEN THEY INTERFERE WITH GOD'S REAL PRIORITY, WHICH IS FOR PEOPLE TO LIVE GRATEFULLY AND FAITHFULLY AND RESPONSIBLY WITH GOD AND WITH THEIR NEIGHBORS.

SO IT'S NOT SIMPLY THE GOOD LIBERALS AGAINST THE REACTIONARY CONSERVATIVES: OR THE STALWART CONSERVATIVES AGAINST THE WEAK-KNEED LIBERALS. IT'S A DIFFERENCE OF BASIC CONVICTION -- OF TRUTH ITSELF. SOMEONE HAS TO WIN AND SOMEONE HAS TO LOSE -- a split -- UNTIL JAMES STANDS UP.

POLITICS IS COMPROMISE; EVERYBODY KNOWS THAT. FROM HENRY CLAY TO THE DAILY MACHINATIONS OF THE CHICAGO CITY COUNCIL, POLITICS IS THE SOMETIMES NOBLE AND ALWAYS ABSOLUTELY NECESSARY ART OF THE POSSIBLE. YOU GIVE A LITTLE, YOU GET A LITTLE, SOMETIMES GET IT ALL, BUT

MOSTLY, IF YOU WILL NOT GIVE, WHAT YOU GET IS CONFLICT, POLARIZATION, ALIENATION, VIOLENCE, MAYBE.

THERE IS A NEW BREED OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHER WRITING TODAY -- SAYING THAT THE FUTURE OF OUR REPUBLIC DEPENDS ON A RENEWED ABILITY TO BE OPEN, TO RELEARN THE ART OF COMPROMISE. CORNELL WEST ARGUES FOR A CENTRIST POLITICAL VISION WHICH HONORS THE CREATIVE ENERGY OF THE MARKET WITHOUT TURNING ITS BACK ON THE ABILITY OF GOVERNMENT TO STAND WITH AND EMPOWER THE POOREST AND MOST MARGINAL OF CITIZENS.

JEAN ELSHTAIN, UNIVERSITY OF

CHICAGO PROFESSOR, IN DEMOCRACY ON TRIAL, PRESENTS A SIMILAR SCENARIO FOR OUR NATIONAL FUTURE.

I HAD THE PRIVILEGE THREE WEEKS AGO TO BE IN ISRAEL AND WHILE THERE TRAVELED TO IBILIN, City of - N.W. TO VISIT PROPHET ELIAS COMMUNITY COLLEGE, A CHRISTIAN INSTITUTION IN A PALESTINIAN CITY, TO MEET WITH ELIAS CHACOUR, CLERGYMAN, PRINCIPAL OF THE COLLEGE, AUTHOR AND ARTICULATE SPOKESPERSON FOR PALESTINIAN-CAUSES, BUT AS PART OF THE NATION OF Citizen of Israel ISRAEL, CHACOUR IS DETESTED BY MILITANTS ON BOTH SIDES, ISRAELI AND PALESTINIAN.

REFLECTING ON THE STATE OF NEGOTIATIONS DURING THE WEEK THE OSLO II AGREEMENT WAS SIGNED AT THE WHITE HOUSE

HE SAID HE WAS PLEASED THAT BOTH SIDES WERE EQUALLY UNHAPPY. IT WAS A SURPRISING REFLECTION BECAUSE MY FIRST REACTION WHEN I HEAR EVERYONE CONDEMNING THE AGREEMENT IS THAT IT MUST BE FLAWED AND WILL NEVER WORK. NOT SO, CHACOUR SAID. THE REALLY DANGEROUS unworkable SITUATION IS WHEN ONE SIDE IS REALLY HAPPY - WHEN ONE SIDE THINKS IT HAS WON AND ACHIEVED ALL ITS OBJECTIVES. IN TERMS OF THE HOPE FOR PEACE, THE BEST SCENARIO FOR BOTH SIDES TO BE EQUALLY UNHAPPY. ~~BOTH SIDES BEING HAPPY IS NOT GOING TO HAPPEN~~

UNLESS YOU KNOW HOW TO COMPROMISE, WHAT YOU GET IS CONFLICT, POLARIZATION, ALIENATION, AND MAYBE VIOLENCE. - Physical - Verbal Emotional

need to find a 3rd way

UNTIL SOMEBODY LIKE JAMES STANDS UP AND SPEAKS A STRONG WORD FROM THE MIDDLE OF THE ROAD.

IF THE LIBERALS WILL AGREE TO A FEW SMALL POINTS, MAYBE THE CONSERVATIVES WILL GIVE ONE MAJOR POINT.

IF THE GENTILE CHRISTIANS, WILL AVOID IDOLS, AND BEHAVE THEMSELVES SEXUALLY, AND BUY THEIR MEAT FROM THE RIGHT BUTCHERS, THE JEWS WILL COMPROMISE ON CIRCUMCISION.

THE DEAL IS DONE. A LETTER IS COMPOSED AND SENT UP TO ANTIOCH WITH THE TERMS EXPLAINED AND EVERYBODY IS HAPPY.

better yet, equally unhappy,
or
willing to be together

AND CHANGE HAPPENED PEACEFULLY AND THE FREEDOM OF GOD'S SPIRIT, ALONG WITH THE IMPORTANCE OF THE TRADITION, WAS HONORED.

AND I THINK IT WAS BECAUSE A person OF INTELLECTUAL BREADTH AND ~~MODERATION~~ OPENNESS, PERSONAL COURAGE AND A GRACIOUS SPIRIT STOOD UP AND SPOKE A STRONG WORD FROM THE CENTER. AND THAT WHOLE DYNAMIC IS A VERY IMPORTANT MODEL, I BELIEVE, FOR CHRISTIAN FAITHFULNESS IN OUR TIME.

AT ITS BEST, OUR OWN RELIGIOUS TRADITION HAS BEEN STRONGLY CENTRIST, A MIDDLE-OF-THE-ROAD APPROACH TO THE MAJOR ISSUES OF FAITH AND LIFE. IT'S NOT

ALWAYS A COMFORTABLE PLACE TO BE ... BUT IT IS WHERE IN GOD'S ECONOMY, I AM CONVINCED, WE ARE CALLED TO BE.

ONE OF OUR FINEST REFORMED THEOLOGIANS WAS H. RICHARD NEIBUHR, BROTHER OF THE MORE-FAMOUS REINHOLD. H. RICHARD TAUGHT AT YALE FOR YEARS AND WROTE ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT BOOKS OF THE CENTURY, THE MEANING OF REVELATION IN WHICH HE WROTE THAT:

"THE GREAT SOURCE OF EVIL IN THIS LIFE IS THE ABSOLUTIZING THE RELATIVE, WHICH IN CHRISTIANITY TAKES THE FORM OF SUBSTITUTING RELIGION, CHURCH, OR MORALITY FOR GOD."

PART OF WHAT IT HAS ALWAYS MEANT TO BE A PRESBYTERIAN CHRISTIAN IS A KIND OF RADICAL REFUSAL TO IDENTIFY ANY HUMAN STRUCTURE, ENTITY, OR IDEOLOGY WITH GOD. PRESBYTERIANS ARE SUSPICIOUS OF ANY RELIGIOUS ATTEMPT TO MAKE ABSOLUTE ANYTHING BUT GOD ALONE. BECAUSE OF THAT HISTORIC SUSPICION OF ANY IDEOLOGY, PARTICULARLY ANY POLITICAL STRUCTURE, THAT CLAIMS ABSOLUTE TRUTH AND DEMANDS ABSOLUTE OBEISANCE, PRESBYTERIANS HAVE A CONSISTENT RECORD OF OPPOSITION TO, AND PERSECUTION BY, THE POLITICS OF THE EXTREME RIGHT AND LEFT. BEFORE ANYBODY ELSE SAID ANYTHING, PRESBYTERIAN REFORMED CLERGY GATHERED AT BARMEN IN

1933 AND CRITIQUED NAZI IDEOLOGY FOR ITS CLAIMS OF ABSOLUTE TRUTH AND IN THE NAME OF JESUS CHRIST UNCATEGORICALLY CONDEMNED IT AS FALSE. AND IT IS NO ACCIDENT THAT THE HEIRS OF THE REFORMER JAN HUS IN EASTERN EUROPE WERE SEVERELY PERSECUTED BY MARXIST DICTATORSHIPS AND THAT WHEN THE ROMANIAN REGIME WAS CRUMBLING THE SPARK THAT SET OFF THE CONFLAGRATION WAS AT A PRESBYTERIAN/REFORMED CHURCH IN TIMOSOARA.

WE HAVE BEEN, DOWN THROUGH THE CENTURIES, A STRONG VOICE FROM THE MIDDLE OF THE ROAD, THEOLOGICALLY, INTELLECTUALLY, SOCIALLY, AND WHEN

NECESSARY, OVERTLY POLITICALLY.

A [redacted]T ESSAY IN THE CHRISTIAN CENTURY OBSERVED THAT:

"THERE IS CONSENSUS ABOUT VERY LITTLE IN AMERICA TODAY -- EXCEPT PERHAPS THAT THERE IS NO CONSENSUS, AND THAT WE LIVE IN AN INCREASINGLY POLARIZED AND VITRIOLIC CULTURE. NO MATTER WHAT THE ISSUE, THE FIRST VOICES TO BE HEARD ARE THE MOST EXTREME AND DIVISIVE, SPEAKING THE POLITICS OF CONTEMPT THAT HAS BECOME SO PERVASIVE." WHAT IS NEEDED, THE AUTHORS Cr[redacted], IS A RENEWED "EMPHATIC CHRISTIAN CENTER." ["FORMING AN EMPHATIC CHRISTIAN CENTER: A CALL TO POLITICAL Responsibility by Kyle Pasewark and Garrett Paul)

RESPONSIBILITY," KYLE A. PASEWARK AND GARRETT E. PAUL, CHRISTIAN CENTURY, AUGUST 24-31, 1994.]

THEY MAKE A VERY HELPFUL DISTINCTION BETWEEN THE CENTER AS MERELY THE MID-POINT BETWEEN TWO EXTREMES, AND THE CENTER AS A "SUBSTANTIVE CORE OF CONVICTION THAT ACTIVELY CENTERS US AS INDIVIDUALS AND AS A SOCIETY." [P.280]

THERE IS A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A MIDDLE-OF-THE-ROAD POSITION WHICH IS ONLY A COMPROMISE POSITION AND WHICH TRIES TO GET THE TWO EXTREMES TO TALK TO ONE ANOTHER -- AND AN "EMPHATIC CENTER THAT DEVELOPS AND ARTICULATES ITS OWN commitments"

COMMITMENTS."

AND IT IS THERE -- THE CORE OF CONVICTION, THE STRONG MIDDLE OF THE ROAD THAT HOPE FOR THE FUTURE IS FOUND -- THE FUTURE OF THE CHURCH IN OUR CULTURE, THE FUTURE OF THE NATION ITSELF.

THESE ARE POLARIZED AND VITRIOLIC TIMES. WITHIN ALL THE CHURCHES THERE ARE VOICES FROM THE EXTREMES; ATTACKING, ABUSING, MALIGNING, SOWING SUSPICION IN THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONVENTION, THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH, THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH. AND IN THE NATION EACH DAILY NEWSPAPER, IT SEEMS, FURTHER DOCUMENTS

HOW PROFOUNDLY WE ARE POLARIZED.

THE WHOLE DISMAYING BUSINESS OF OKLAHOMA CITY AND THE RIGHT-WING MILITIAS PREPARING TO GO TO WAR AGAINST THE REST OF US SENT ME TO MY SHELVES LOOKING FOR A BOOK WRITTEN IN THE 1960S, -- THE STRANGE TACTICS OF EXTREMISM. HARRY AND BONARO OVERSTREET HAD WRITTEN ABOUT THE THREAT OF COMMUNISM: THIS BOOK WAS WRITTEN AS THE JOHN BIRCH SOCIETY AND OTHER RIGHT-WING GROUPS WERE ATTACKING THE GOVERNMENT, UNIVERSITIES, CHURCHES -- WITH WHAT SEEMS LIKE SOME SUCCESS.

"WE IN AMERICA," THE OVERSTREETS WROTE,

"HAVING GIVEN EXTREMISM, AS IT WERE, A CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHT TO EXIST -- HAVE BEEN ABLE TO AFFORD THE ACTIVE PRESENCE OF A FAR RIGHT AND FAR LEFT BECAUSE WE HAVE BEEN OVERWHELMINGLY A NATION OF MODERATES. EXTREMISTS OF LEFT AND RIGHT, HOME-GROWN AND IMPORTED, HAS BEEN WITH US ALWAYS. BUT THE LIBERAL-CONSERVATIVE OR CONSERVATIVE-LIBERAL CENTER HAS BEEN THE NATURAL HABITAT OF THE VAST MAJORITY OF OUR PEOPLE."[P.13]

THE DANGER, THE OVERSTREETS ARGUE, IS THAT IF THERE AREN'T ENOUGH OF US IN THE CENTER -- INTENTIONALLY -- WITH A STRONG SENSE OF WHY WE ARE THERE, THE EXTREMES HAVE MORE INFLUENCE AND

DISRUPTIVE POWER THAN WE CAN AFFORD TO LET THEM HAVE.

PEOPLES AND NATIONS HAVE NOT ALWAYS REMEMBERED THAT. THE RUSSIAN PEOPLE ALLOWED THEIR REVOLUTION TO BE CO-OPTED BY LENINIST EXTREMISTS, AND ONE OF THE LONGEST AND MOST BRUTAL DICTATORSHIPS THE WORLD HAS EVER KNOWN WAS THE RESULT. FIFTEEN YEARS LATER, PARTIALLY IN FEAR OF THAT VERY EXTREME, THE GERMAN PEOPLE WENT TO THE POLLS AND ELECTED THE NATIONAL SOCIALISTS, THE NAZI PARTY, AND THEIR LEADER, ADOLPH HITLER.

WHERE THERE IS NO STRONG CENTER, A STRONG AND COURAGEOUS VOICE FROM THE

MIDDLE-OF-THE-ROAD, EXTREMES OF LEFT AND RIGHT, WILL PREVAIL.

So that, I propose, is our vocation -- in our churches, and in our communities, in our local PTAs, school boards, civic associations, and in the body politic: to risk "shivering in the draft from an open mind," to resist the temptation to absolutize our own convictions, our ideology, our political party, even our church and its traditions; to stand, intentionally, strongly, feet planted firmly, in the middle of the road.

The reason is that the world -- the

CHURCH -- NEEDS US TO BE THERE. GOD, I'LL RISK SUGGESTING, NEEDS US TO BE THERE.

DO YOU REMEMBER THE LAST THING PETER SAID TO THAT AUGUST CHURCH TRIBUNAL IN JERUSALEM? THERE WAS MUCH DEBATE AND DISSENTION, PRO AND CON, LIBERAL AND CONSERVATIVE, LEFT AND RIGHT. IT MUST HAVE BEEN VERY HEATED, AND I KNOW THE IDEOLOGICAL OPPONENTS WERE PRETTY MUCH CONDEMNING ONE ANOTHER TO HELL; AND JUST BEFORE JAMES STOOD UP AND DELIVERED HIS STRONG WORD FROM THE MIDDLE OF THE ROAD, PETER SAID SOMETHING THAT PUT THAT DEBATE, AND ALL OF OUR DEBATES EVER SINCE, INTO PERSPECTIVE.

"WE BELIEVE WE WILL BE SAVED," HE SAID, BY THE GRACE OF THE LORD JESUS; NOT BY OUR RELIGIOUS OR CULTURAL TRADITION, OUR CREEDS, OUR THEOLOGIES, OUR MORALITIES, NOT CERTAINLY BY WINNING THIS CONFLICT ... "WE WILL BE SAVED," HE SAID, "BY THE GRACE OF THE LORD JESUS -- JUST AS THEY WILL."

God loves them

THAT IS THE GOSPEL ... GOD LOVES US. IN JESUS CHRIST, GOD LOVES AND REDEEMS AND SAVES ALL WHO WILL ACCEPT THE GIFT. IT IS OUT OF GOD'S MYSTERIOUS, AMAZING GRACIOUSNESS.

WE ARE SAVED, NOT BECAUSE WE ARE

PRESBYTERIANS OR BAPTISTS OR ROMAN CATHOLICS; NOT BECAUSE WE ARE CONSERVATIVES OR LIBERALS, REPUBLICANS OR DEMOCRATS ... members of the PLC | PLGC | PFR | PPL | PPC

WE WILL BE SAVED -- "JUST AS THEY WILL," WHOEVER "THEY" ARE, BY THE GRACE OF THE LORD JESUS ...

~~ALL PRAISE TO HIM.~~

depends on who is answering the question....

PART 2 Words Sandburg used about the time before Civil War: something dying! been born: many would ever be the same.

WHERE WE ARE AS A CHURCH ~~IS IN A~~ CRISIS WHICH SOME ~~BELIEVE FORESH~~ADOWS THE VERY ~~EXISTENCE OF THE PC(USA)~~ AS A VIABLE ~~NATIONAL ENTITY~~.

Some see the recreation of Presbyterianism - Some see its demise

~~YOU KNOW THE LITANY OF DESPAIR~~.

We all agree that →

A THIRTY YEAR DECLINE IN MEMBERS HAS BROUGHT US TO AN ALL-TIME LOW -- GRADUALLY, (SINCE COLONIAL TIMES,) WE HAVE BEEN EDGED OFF CENTER STAGE AND SUDDENLY WE FIND THAT WE ARE NO LONGER IN THE "MAINSTREAM" OR MAINLINE WE ARE SO FOND OF INVOKING.

42 to 47

AS A SIDEBAR -- I'M GOING TO START SUGGESTING THAT WE EXEGETE THE TERM "MAINLINE" WITH ALL THE HISTORICAL TOOLS AT OUR DISPOSAL ...

to P 47
time?

MAINLINE -- A TERM WHICH REFERRED TO THE MAIN, MAJOR RAILROAD ROUTE, FROM EAST TO WEST: THE PENNSYLVANIA RAILROAD, TO BE EXACT ... FOR A LITTLE MORE THAN A CENTURY, FROM MID-19TH TO MID 20TH.

TRAVELING WEST, FROM PHILADELPHIA, TOWARD THE ALLEGHENY MOUNTAINS, SMALL COMMUNITIES GREW UP AROUND THE PRR TRACKS.

ARDMORE, BRYN MAWR, SWARTHMORE,

THEY WERE, AND STILL ARE CALLED THE MAINLINE.

WHAT MADE THE MAINLINE ROMANTIC WAS THE PASSENGER TRAFFIC RIDING ON A VARIETY OF WONDERFUL TRAINS DEPARTING FROM PENN STATION/G[redacted]L IN NEW YORK CITY - A STEADY STREAM OF GREAT TRAINS, ALL DAY AND NIGHT -

LED BY THE STAR OF THE RAILS, THE BROADWAY LIMITED, WHICH LEFT NEW YORK CITY EVERY DAY AND PULLED INTO UNION STATION IN CHICAGO TWENTY FOUR HOURS LATER.

ONE MONTH AGO THE BROADWAY LIMITED

- the last passenger train to run from NYC to Chi.

DISCONTINUED OPERATIONS.

THERE ARE VERY FEW PASSENGER TRAINS RUNNING ON THE MAIN LINE. IN ORDER TO RIDE A TRAIN FROM NEW YORK CITY TO CHICAGO, YOU HAVE TO STOP IN PITTSBURGH FOR SEVERAL HOURS LAYOVER IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT.

TRAVELERS -- WHO WANT TO GO FROM NEW YORK TO CHICAGO -- EITHER FLY, OR DRIVE THEIR AUTOMOBILES, OR RIDE BUSSES -- OR THE GOVERNMENT'S FAVORITE MODE OF TRANSPORTATION: INDIVIDUAL [redacted]S CRUISING AT 75 MILES PER HOUR ON THE GOVERNMENT'S MAINLINE -- THE INTERSTATE HIGHWAY SYSTEM.

drive their automobiles

vehicles, propelled by fossil fuel,

IN THE MEANTIME, THINGS ARE BUSY ON THE OLD MAIN LINE -- NOT SO MUCH WITH GLAMOROUS PASSENGER TRAINS, BUT WITH FREIGHT -- THE ABSOLUTELY NECESSARY COMMERCIAL LINKAGE FOR OUR NATION.

IF "MAINLINE" HAS EFFICACY AS METAPHOR -- WE NEED TO EXEGETE CAREFULLY AND SEE WHERE IT LEADS --

IF THE TRAVELERS HAVE ABANDONED US IS IT BECAUSE WE ARE IN THE WRONG PLACES AND DOING THINGS THE OLD WAY, WHICH IS NOW ABOUT 100 YEARS OUT OF DATE --

AND ARE WE THE FREIGHT HAULERS FOR A CULTURE STILL TRYING TO FIGURE OUT

WHAT ITS ABOUT -- AND SHOULD WE MONITOR THE TRACKS, EQUIPMENT, AND DO OUR JOB AS EFFICIENTLY AS WE CAN -- AND NOT TRY TO BE AN AIRLINE ...?

... WHICH IS ABOUT AS FAR AS THE METAPHORICAL/EXEGETICAL EXPEDITION WILL CARRY ME!

OUR DECLINE -- OR BETTER PUT, I THINK, OUR DISPLACEMENT FROM THE MAINSTREAM LINE BEGAN TO BE NOTICEABLE AFTER THE HALCYON DAYS OF THE 50'S AND 60'S WHEN THE PRESIDENT OF THE USA WAS BAPTIZED IN A PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH AND HELPED RAISE MONEY FOR THE CHURCH, AND THE INTER-CHURCH CENTER IN NYC.

-AND WHEN OUR STATED [redacted], EUGENE CARSON BLAKE, APPEARED ON THE COVER OF TIME MAGAZINE -- WITH BISHOP JAMES PIKE OF THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH ANNOUNCING A NEW ECUMENICAL INITIATIVE CALLED THE CONSULTATION ON CHURCH UNION.

WITH THE 60'S A RADICAL DISLOCATION BEGAN IN THIS COUNTRY -- WHICH CAUGHT US UP IN ITS TRAUMA AND TRAVAIL AND WE HAVE BEEN SUFFERING EVER SINCE.

MY PERSONAL ANALYSIS IS LIKE THE PRR A[redacted]C -- OUR BASIC PROBLEM IS THAT WE HAVE TOO MUCH OUT-OF-DATE EQUIPMENT, REAL ESTATE IN THE WRONG PLACES, AND

MANAGEMENT TRAINING PROGRAMS DESIGNED TO TRAIN LEADERS FOR THE LAST CENTURY, AND AN INCREDIBLE INABILITY TO DISCERN THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES --

CHICAGO IS A CASE IN POINT -- MANY CHURCHES IN NEIGHBORHOODS WHICH HAVE UNDERGONE VAST CHANGE --

OLD BUILDINGS, HIGH MAINTENANCE, LEADERS BROUGHT IN AND ASKED TO FIGURE OUT HOW TO SQUEEZE ENOUGH MONEY OUT OF THE FEW, AGING PRESBYTERIANS, TO PATCH UP THE BOILER.

AND A RING OF ROBUST SUBURBAN CHURCHES DOING WELL --

WHAT WE DO, TO OUR DISCREDIT, IS SIT AROUND WRINGING OUR HANDS ABOUT MEMBERSHIP LOSS + AND DUMP ON THE PEOPLE AND LEADERS OF THOSE FRAGILE URBAN AND SMALL TOWN OUTPOSTS THE BURDEN FOR OUR DECLINE.

AND ~~ONCE THEY MOVE~~ -- WE LOOK AROUND FOR SOMEONE TO BLAME --

ALL OF THAT CAME TO A HEAD IN 1994 IN THE RE-IMAGINING AFFAIR.

THE CONFERENCE IN MINNEAPOLIS, THE AUTUMN BEFORE BROUGHT TOGETHER ~~4,000~~ 2,000 WOMEN AND FEMINIST THINKERS/THEOLOGIANS, TO THINK PRAY, SHARE, SING, CELEBRATE

THEIR FAITH AND THEIR IDENTITY.

SOME WONDERFUL THINGS HAPPENED.

VAST MAJORITY OF THE [illegible] THOUGHT IT

WAS A GREAT EVENT.

SOME OUTRAGEOUS THINGS HAPPENED --

CHALLENGING, INTENTIONALLY IRRELEVANT,

PROPHETIC AND BORDERLINE PROFANE --

IT SEEMED TO SOME, PARTICULARLY

AFTER THE FACT THAT SOME SPEAKERS WERE

TRIVIALIZING, MALIGNING, LAUGHING ABOUT

PRECIOUS CHRISTIAN SYMBOLS AND BELIEFS.

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (USA) HAD

$60,000 INVESTED AND WE SENT PEOPLE,

STAFF AND LAITY.

WHEN THE CONFERENCE WAS REPORTED AND CONDEMNED BY THE LAYMEN AND FRIENDS THE RESPONSE WAS ENORMOUS. 52 OVERTURES.

AN IMMEDIATE AND DRASTIC REDUCTION IN SUPPORT AND, OMINOUSLY, PER CAPITA, -- SERIOUS EROSION OF CONFIDENCE IN LEADERSHIP.

AT WICHITA, THE ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE TO REVIEW GAC RECEIVED THE WHOLE MESS -- AND WROTE A REPORT THAT, FOR THE MOMENT, AT LEAST GOT THE CHURCH PAST THE CRISIS.

AND AMONG THE PHRASES IN THAT

REPORT THAT CAUGHT THE IMAGINATION OF THE WHOLE CHURCH WAS -- THEOLOGY MATTERS. I even have a T-Shirt that says it. I get stares on Lake Front - "Just Do It" | Back off: I have PMS and a hand gun.

LET'S THINK ABOUT WHAT ~~THAT~~ it MEANS - to say 'Theology Matters'

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BEN JOHNSON, DEAN HOGE, DONALD LUIDENS WHO HAVE WRITTEN SO HELPFULLY ABOUT BABY BOOMERS, CONCLUDE --

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> "IF THE MAINLINE CHURCHES WANT TO REGAIN THEIR VITALITY, THEIR FIRST STEP MUST BE TO ADDRESS THEOLOGICAL ISSUES HEAD ON."

COALTER, MULDER AND WEEKS, THE RE-FORMING TRADITION --

"WE BELIEVE THAT THEOLOGY IS THE MOST IMPORTANT INGREDIENT IN THE PRESBYTERIAN PREDICAMENT."

AND LOREN MEADE, ONCE AND FUTURE:

"THE FUTURE CHURCH DEMANDS A NEW FOCUS ON THEOLOGY, A CHANGE FROM THE LIBRARY AND UNIVERSITY TO THE LOCAL CHURCH."

I THINK WHAT WE HAVE DISCOVERED IS THAT FOR 30 YEARS WE HAVE BEEN BEHAVING AS IF THEOLOGY DOES NOT MATTER -- OR AT LEAST NOT AS MUCH AS ACTION MATTERS.

... AND WE ARE DISCOVERING THAT OUR THEOLOGY -- OR THEOLOGIZING -- IS WHAT WE PRESBYTERIANS DO BEST.

-- IT CLARIFIES WHO WE ARE AND WHOSE WE ARE.

OUR TRADITION IS THAT "THINKING ABOUT THE FAITH DEEPENS OUR LIVING OF THE FAITH AND THEREFORE OUR ABILITY TO LOVE GOD AND EACH OTHER.

ONE OF MY CONCERNS IS THAT THE MOTIF THEOLOGY MATTERS HAS BEEN TAKEN UP AS A NEW WAR CRY BY SOME IN THE CHURCH WHO WISH TO USE OUR THEOLOGY AND THE

REFORMED TRADITION TO DEFINE AS PRECISELY AS WE CAN WHAT IT IS WE BELIEVE.

IN ORDER THAT -- THOSE WHO DO NOT SUBSCRIBE TO OUR THEOLOGICAL FORMULAS WILL BE IDENTIFIED -- AND INVITED TO LEAVE.

I HAVE A VERY DIFFICULT TIME WITH THE NOTION THAT THEOLOGY IS A LINE DRAWN IN THE SAND, OR A BOUNDARY, THE PURPOSE OF WHICH IS TO DEFINE WHO IS AND WHO IS NOT ...

I DO NOT ADVOCATE A THEOLOGY WITHOUT BOUNDARIES -- OUR CONFESSIONS

ARE THE CHURCH'S FAITHFUL EXPOSITION OF the Gospel ~~FAITH~~ IN EVERY AGE -- BUT I DO WORRY ABOUT A USE OF THEOLOGY, THE LANGUAGE OF THEOLOGY, THE PROCESS OF THEOLOGICAL DISCOURSE, TO DEFINE WHO GETS IN AND WHO MUST LEAVE.

On the other hand

WE WILL BE DISAPPOINTED IF WE HOPE THAT THEOLOGY WILL UNITE US. IT WON'T. IN A SENSE, GOOD, ROBUST THEOLOGICAL CONVERSATION DIVIDES -- OR AT LEAST ILLUMINATE OUR DIVERSITY. WE DON'T ALL BELIEVE IN THE SAME WAY.

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JOHN BURGESS --

"A DISCUSSION OF FAITH MAY REQUIRE ONE TO ADMIT THAT ONE ISN'T ENTIRELY SURE WHO GOD IS, WHY JESUS DIED, OR WHETHER THE SCRIPTURES ARE RELIABLE, TO CONFESS TO THE EXPERIENCE OF GOD'S ABSENCE AS WELL AS TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE REALITY OF GOD'S PRESENCE."

OR, AS MY MENTOR, JOSEPH SITTLER USED TO TEACH, THE NECESSITY IN THEOLOGY OF "MODESTY, BEFORE ALL THAT WE DO NOT KNOW."

WHEN WE TALK ABOUT WHAT WE BELIEVE, AND OUR EXPERIENCE OF FAITH -- WE WILL NOT ALL AGREE AND IN FACT IT MIGHT BE HELPFUL TO ACKNOWLEDGE THAT THE PRODUCT OF ANY HONEST THEOLOGICAL DISCOURSE WILL BE THE ARTICULATION OF DIFFERENT OPINIONS. IF IT WERE NOT SO, WHY BOTHER? WHY NOT APPOINT A "COLLEGE OF BISHOPS?" TO TELL US WHAT AND HOW TO BELIEVE?

MATTERS - but it

THEOLOGY DOESN'T UNITE US. WHAT UNTIES US IS A COMMON FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST AND THE EXPERIENCE OF RECONCILIATION WITH GOD, THROUGH HIM, - - AND THE ACTUALITY OF RECONCILIATION

WITH ONE ANOTHER.

IN A DIALOGUE IN THE CHRISTIAN CENTURY BETWEEN THOMAS ODEN AND LEW MUDGE, ODEN ARGUED FOR DEFINING CLEAR THEOLOGICAL BOUNDARIES. THERE ARE MANY WHO WANT TO DO THIS -- TO SAY WHAT WE BELIEVE WITH PRECISION, AND TO MUST THOSE WHO DON'T AGREE TO LEAVE. (WHAT THE PLC IS PROPOSING IN ITS PAPER IS BOUNDARIES.)

MUDGE REMINDS US THAT THE VERY HEART OF OUR THEOLOGICAL TRADITION: THE PROTESTANT PRINCIPLE IS THAT GOD ALONE IS ABSOLUTE AND THAT EVERY THEOLOGY, ECCLESIOLOGY, MUST SUBMIT TO THE CRITICAL INQUIRY OF SCRIPTURE AND THE

HOLY SPIRIT SPEAKING THROUGH SCRIPTURE.

WE'RE SUSPICIOUS WHEN ANYTHING GETS TOO TIGHTLY NAILED DOWN --

-EVEN A PARTICULAR INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE.

-LUTHER -- RE-READ AND RE-INTERPRETED ROMANS AND, FOR THAT MATTER, WENT ON RE-IMAGINE THE CHURCH, COMMUNITY, GOD - SO DID JOHN CALVIN.

THE HOPEFUL OUTCOME IS THAT WE ARE TAKING OUR THEOLOGY MORE SERIOUSLY. LOTS OF PEOPLE CAME TO PITTSBURGH IN APRIL TO TALK ABOUT WHAT WE BELIEVED. LOTS MORE CAME TO CINCINNATI BEFORE THE G.A. TO DO THE SAME.

RE-IMAGINING STIMULATED MORE

DISCUSSION OF ATONEMENT THAN AT ANY OTHER TIME IN THE PAST 100 YEARS.

IT APPEARS THAT WE ARE CHANGING AND THAT ACROSS THE CHURCH PASTORS AND PEOPLE ARE INVESTING MORE SUBSTANTIALLY IN THE TASK OF DOING THEOLOGY.

MY HOPE FOR OUR CHURCH IS THAT THE CENTER WILL FIND ITS VOICE, NOT AS A COMPROMISE BETWEEN VOCAL LEFT AND RIGHT, BUT AS THE STRONG SUBSTANTIVE CORE OF CONVICTION.

IN THE MIDDLE, REGARDLESS OF THE ISSUE, SEXUALITY, ORDINATION, REPRESENTATION, MISSION POLICY - THERE IS GREAT WISDOM, FEW DOCTRINAIRE POSITIONS, A WILLINGNESS TO LISTEN AND ACCOMMODATE DIFFERENCES, AN ACCEPTANCE

OF DIVERSITY EVEN WHEN THAT DIVERSITY CHALLENGES OUR OWN CERTAINTIES, AND AN ABSENCE OF HARSHNESS, MEANNESS, AN ABUNDANCE OF GENTLENESS. + CIVILITY "

AND ONE THING FURTHER -- 4 OUT OF 5 PRESBYTERIANS ...

IN 1993 A REPORT ON HUMAN SEXUALITY CAME TO G.A. THAT GOT US IN EVERY NEWSPAPER AND ON TELEVISION. IT GAVE THE LEFT AND RIGHT AN OPPORTUNITY TO OPEN FIRE -- WHICH THEY DID. THE G.A. IN BALTIMORE WAS PACKED; SRO: THEN AN ALL-DAY CONVERSATION STARTED + THE MIDDLE FOUND ITS VOICE. IT GOT BORING - - PRESS LEFT. MAN SITTING BESIDE ME SAID "ONLY PRESBYTERIANS CAN MAKE SEX

UNINTERESTING." AND WE ARRIVED AT A PLACE NEITHER LEFT OR RIGHT.

IN TERMS OF WHAT IS AHEAD -- WHO KNOWS -- BUT THE MIDDLE HAS TO STEP UP AND BE HEARD. THE LEFT AND RIGHT ALREADY KNOW WHERE THEY ARE -- AND IN WHAT WAY THE OTHER SIDE IS MOVING.

MY HOPE IS THAT THE CONVERSATION INCLUDES MORE THAN 10 OR 20 PERCENT OF US.

HOW TO TALK WITH ONE ANOTHER WHEN WE DISAGREE:

THERE ARE METHODS --

PASTORS OUGHT TO KNOW THEM AND BECOME SKILLED USING THEM.

ONE DISTILLATION OF SUCH A METHOD

IS THE DOCUMENT WE PRODUCED:

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SEEKING TO BE FAITHFUL TOGETHER GUIDELINES FOR PRESBYTERIANS DURING TIMES OF DISAGREEMENT.

PRETTY BASIC AND SIMPLE STUFF.

1. TREAT EACH OTHER RESPECTFULLY SO AS TO BUILD TRUST, BELIEVING THAT WE ALL DESIRE TO BE FAITHFUL TO JESUS CHRIST;

2. LEARN ABOUT VARIOUS POSITIONS ON THE TOPIC OF DISAGREEMENT.

3. STATE WHAT WE THINK WE HEARD AND ASK FOR CLARIFICATION BEFORE RESPONDING, IN AN EFFORT TO BE SURE WE UNDERSTAND

EACH OTHER.

4. SHARE OUR CONCERNS DIRECTLY WITH INDIVIDUALS OR GROUPS WITH WHOM WE HAVE DISAGREEMENTS IN A SPIRIT OF LOVE AND RESPECT IN KEEPING WITH JESUS' TEACHING.

5. FOCUS ON IDEAS AND SUGGESTIONS INSTEAD OF QUESTIONING PEOPLE'S MOTIVES, INTELLIGENCE OR INTEGRITY;

6. SHARE OUR PERSONAL EXPERIENCES ABOUT THE SUBJECT OF DISAGREEMENT SO THAT OTHERS MAY MORE FULLY UNDERSTAND

OUR CONCERNS.

7. INDICATE WHERE WE AGREE WITH THOSE OF OTHER VIEWPOINTS AS WELL AS WHERE WE DISAGREE.

8. SEEK TO STAY IN COMMUNITY WITH EACH OTHER THOUGH THE DISCUSSION MAY BE VIGOROUS AND FULL OF TENSION;

9. FOLLOW THESE ADDITIONAL GUIDELINES WHEN WE MEET IN DECISION-MAKING BODIES:

10. INCLUDE OUR DISAGREEMENTS IN OUR PRAYERS, NOT PRAYING FOR THE TRIUMPH OF OUR VIEWPOINTS, BUT SEEKING GOD'S GRACE TO LISTEN ATTENTIVELY, TO SPEAK CLEARLY, AND TO REMAIN OPEN TO THE VISION GOD HOLDS FOR US ALL.

A FINAL WORD ON METHODOLOGY -- WHEN THE GOING GETS TOUGH -- AN INCLUSIVE CONVERSATION.

TWO DYNAMICS ALWAYS HAPPEN WHEN THE TOPIC IS CONTROVERSIAL.

- THE FEW WHO FEEL DEEPEST, OR TALK FASTEST -- DO ALL THE SPEAKING, THE REST SIT BACK AND LISTEN. SOMETIMES AFTER THE MEETING FIND THEMSELVES WONDERING

WHY THEY DIDN'T SPEAK UP.

- AND THE FEW WHO ARE DOING THE TALKING START TO ARGUE. NOW WHEN YOU'RE IN AN ARGUMENT, YOU LISTEN TO YOUR OPPONENT ONLY INSOFAR AS YOU HAVE TO IN ORDER TO PREPARE YOUR NEXT THRUST, SALVO

SOMETIMES BOTH OF THOSE DYNAMICS OCCUR IN THE FIRST 10 SECONDS OF THE DISCUSSION.

THERE IS AN ALTERNATIVE - I CALL IT AN INCLUSIVE CONVERSATION.

-- ALL PARTICIPATE, ALL LISTEN

GROUND RULES:

CHAIR OR MODERATOR SAYS:

"THIS IS VERY IMPORTANT. IT IS CRITICAL THAT EVERY MEMBER OF THIS GROUP KNOW WHAT EVERY OTHER MEMBER IS THINKING. SO, LET'S GO AROUND THE TABLE -- AND EACH PERSON, IN ORDER, WILL SAY WHAT HE/SHE WANTS TO SAY -- WHAT HE/SHE IS FEELING AND THINKING RIGHT NOW ABOUT THIS ISSUE AND ABOUT WHERE WE ARE AS A GROUP.

WE'LL CHALLENGE AND ARGUE LATER. FOR NOW -- PLEASE LISTEN TO WHAT EACH SAYS:

WE DID IT SEVERAL TIMES AT WICHITA -- ONCE TO BEGIN -- TO GET EVERYBODY'S PRECONCEPTIONS OUT.

AND LATER, AT A CRITICAL TIME,

AFTER WE HAD LISTENED TO 112 WITNESSES AND 10 MAJOR SPEAKERS.

WE WENT AROUND THE TABLE -- IT TOOK 2 HOURS -- AND EACH SPOKE.

MARTIN BUBER SAYS SOMEWHERE THAT THERE ARE LEVELS OF CONVERSATION, NOT INTERPERSONAL DISCOURSE — ~~PERSONAL DISCOURSE~~.

EXCHANGE OF IDEAS

EXCHANGE OF FEELING -- deeper than discourse

BUT THERE IS ALSO DIALOGUE WHICH LEAVES HEARER AND SPEAKER IN A DIFFERENT PLACE AFTERWARD, I.E., ~~TRANSFORMATIONAL~~ TRANSFORMING DIALOGUE.

THAT HAPPENED -- IT CAN HAPPEN -- PERHAPS IT NEEDS TO HAPPEN AROUND THE ISSUES FACING US.

MY SUGGESTION IS THAT WE HAVE AN

INCLUSIVE CONVERSATION, NOW, AROUND EACH TABLE.

THERE ARE TWO QUESTIONS BEFORE US -- AND THEY WILL HAVE A WAY OF BECOMING ONE.

1 WHAT ARE MY HOPES FOR THE PC(USA)?

2 WHERE AM I ON THE QUESTION OF THE ORDAINING OF GAY AND LESBIAN PERSONS?

I WOULD ASK YOU EACH TO PARTICIPATE -- EVEN IF YOU THINK YOU HAVE NOTHING TO SAY -- OPEN YOUR MOUTH AND START TALKING.

AND I WOULD ASK YOU TO RISK BEING HONEST -- WHEREVER YOU ARE -- WHATEVER EXPERIENCE HAS FORMED YOU, PLEASE SAY

as a member of the PC(USA)
as a Christian who has a sexual identity + opinions, maybe not even consistent opinions about the reality of homosexuality + the relationship of homosexual persons & the ch

IT.

And -- PLEASE LISTEN ACTIVELY, LEAN INTO THIS CONVERSATION, OPEN YOUR EYES AND EARS AND HEARTS.

and be open to the transforming spirit of God which, will do between. (I) always a presence + a participant, when in Jesus Christ. We are together, and determined. to stay together..

AND I WILL SET IT UP,

SOT HAT ALL OTHER PEOPLES MAY SEEK THE LORD --

EVEN ALL THE GENTILES OVER WHOM MY NAME HAS BEEN CALLED.

THUS SAYS THE LORD, WHO HAS BEEN MAKING THESE THINGS KNOWN FROM LONG AGO.

"

— THEREFORE, I HAVE REACHED THE DECISION THAT WE SHOULD NOT TROUBLE THOSE GENTILES WHO ARE TURNING TO GOD, BUT WE SHOULD WRITE TO THEM TO ABSTAIN ONLY FROM THINGS POLLUTED BY IDOLS AND FROM FORNICATION AND FROM WHATEVER HAS BEEN STRANGLED AND FROM BLOOD. "

end of the story— this

story at least.. although the church has found itself in similar circumstances in every generation for 2,000 yrs.